

Discourse through Debate

著者	Pendell Patrice
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Patrice Pendell

Student-centered English communication classes are challenging to teach and to develop. This is compounded by several factors salient in a Japanese university context. First, the classes meet once a week and although 90 minutes long, the actual time students spent speaking can be considerably less, and often diluted with various tasks including preparation or lack of and the teacher doing the talking. Add a multitude of mundane topics which follow familiar patterns from years of English study, hardly riveting subjects. Finally, students' general apprehensions to speak English or express opinions are omnipresent challenges at Japanese universities. It isn't easy to get and keep students speaking in English let alone with interest or passion. However students report in their class evaluations their desire to speak more English and talk to all their classmates. Prepared with information, I developed a conversations class in the guise of debates with compelling topics and structured to reflect the basic organization of an English academic paragraph. This paper will discuss the format and benefits of the *Discourse through Debate* class developed for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university class.

Introduction

Debates have a long history dating back 4000 years to the Egyptians, and as a teaching strategy over 2,500 years ago to Protagorus (481-411 BCE). Debates promote language proficiency and a variety of skills including critical thinking with meaningful communication- speaking, listening and writing. (Combs & Bourne 1994) Debate as an educational vehicle can require sophisticated reasoning and vast amounts of research not with standing practice with deft communication skills. Debaters can be passionate communicators. Whether ivy-league debate teams or EFL learners, debates are a useful education tools.

Adapting debate pedagogy for use in a university EFL class is a natural application and exists in variety of forms from which I applied debate as a process for oral communication- a means to an end. The goal was to create a student-centered class which stimulated language, developed fluency and engaged students in novel ways. I wanted to get students speaking and, offering their opinions. This was accomplished through systematic debate presentations and strategic tools.

The basic structure of the debate reflected an academic paragraph with the opening and closing statements in the debate corresponding to the topic/conclusion sentences in a paragraph. Additionally,

debate points were scored when detailed examples were given again mimicking skilled writing. The concept of writing in detail rather than broad, simple statements was a hurdle asked of my language learners in order to transform mundane writing to interesting and meaningful communication, and as it turned out, to win debates.

Research and preparation for the students was kept to a minimum. The preparation page (Appendix 1) allowed the students to think and write a few notes about the topic. Students were rewarded when prepared and peer pressure was effective motivation for preparation.

General Debate Format

The debate had two sides (rice or bread) and two students per team took opposing positions. The fifth student's role was as Judge who was basically in charge of the debate. As the leader, the Judge keeps time; tells the others what to do; give compliments (an example of something the team argued or said well); preserves the debates as 'English Only'; keeps score and decides the winner; reports the low point score first then the high points and winner. If there are only four students in the group, one student takes on both roles as team member and Judge. It is important to not allow the group to exceed five students in order to give everyone a speaking role. Especially at first when the debates are somewhat stilted and quiet, with groups of four or five all students must speak either at the opening, closing or as a Judge.

Group Dynamics

Students were put in groups of four or five students, which they remained for the entire class period. There were three debates per class. For each debate, students partnered with a new person in the group to mix the students within their group. Then in the next class, different students were grouped together. While students are reluctant to interact with all their classmates on their own initiative, this rotation pattern easily created a constant mix of student teams, and was a feature students especially liked. Additionally arranging students in small groups allowed the teacher to move between groups during the debate cycle to observe, encourage and offer suggestions.

Procedure

Groups of four or five students were formed and they arranged their desks facing each other with the same team sitting side-by-side. If the group had five students, the Judge sat in a desk set perpendicular. Within the first five minutes the teacher publicly checked the students' preparations sheets giving five points to those prepared. Quickly, and with a big '5' written on students' preparation

sheets, this was positive public accountability. Students who were not prepared are marked for attendance without the five points and a clean preparation sheet handed out. While this was going on, students decided the Judges in their group by *JenKenPon* and Judging sheets (Appendix 2) were passed out to Judge #1; #2; #3 along with timers (kitchen timer from the 100-yen store). Students decided which side of the debate they would argue. Judges then managed the debate and keep the debate on time and in English.

Debate Schedule:

5 Minutes	Confer	Team Members discuss debate points.
2 Minutes	Opening Statement	Each Team states position
5 Minutes	Debate	Everybody speaks; Judge able to ask questions or prompt Team Members if debate slows
2 Minutes	Closing statements	Each Team summarizes position; can add new information revealed through debate; a different person from the opening statement.
2 Minutes	Judge Report	Compliments; scores; and winner

Debate Techniques

Opening and Close Statements

The open and close of the debates had a template form which was written on the board.

Students 'filled in the blanks' as follows:

☐ Opening Statements

We think _____ is best for the following reasons:

First, _____, for example _____. Second, _____, for example _____. (And so on)

☐ Closing Statements

_____ is best for the following reasons:

*First, _____, for example _____. Second, _____, for example _____.
For these reasons, we think _____ is best.*

Strategies

☐ Teamwork

Students open and close the debate using “We” rather than “I.” The importance of language in reflecting teamwork was discussed. Students were taught language and support idioms, e.g., *Good job; Nice point; Yeah, that’s right!*

○ Organization

Provide reasons in numeric order with detailed examples: First- then state point followed up an example which *paints a picture* or illustrates; making the points compelling.

○ Don’t Lose

Students were cautioned not to agree or utter supporting statements when the opposing side made a good point. Rather when faced with good points, ask a clarification question and/or change the subject.

○ Ask Questions

Students were instructed to ask questions either for opinions or to clarify a point made by the opposing team.

○ Third Person and Experts

Third party language and references were discussed to strengthen positions in the debate. Students used the third person, *‘They say; Most people agree that.’*

The use of references/experts were discussed but not required for example, *‘The Japan Time recently reported’* or reporting statistics from governmental agencies such as the World Health Organization and so on.

Topics

A varied of topics can be discussed and many topics are available. However, care should be taken to choose topics that have distinct differences. Additionally, students were asked to suggest topics. Some effective topics were: bread/rice; mountain/sea; spring/fall; city/country/coffee/tea; uniforms/free-dress; movie theater/DVD; cats/dogs; Hokkaido/Okinawa; girl/boy; nengajo/email; car/commute; older partner/younger partner; married/single and so on.

Discussion

The goals of the class were to get students speaking, to offer opinions and to have fun. This was accomplished through systematic presentations with strategic tools. Establishing clear roles and responsibilities gave students various opportunities to speak with all their classmates and lead the group. This also kept the activity student-centered. The familiar structure allowed students to gain confidence, have fun and turn their attention to the task at hand- win debates.

The group dynamics were an important feature. Small groups meant all students had to speak.

Within each class period, students had a chance to mix-it-up within their group of four or five students. Small groups allowed the teacher to move between groups to offer suggestions as well as remind students to use detailed examples and other debate strategies discussed in class. The three debates used 60–70 minutes of class time, which gave time to teach debate strategies or students to work on their preparation sheets for the next class.

The procedure was clear and simple to follow. Students easily learned and adapted to the class. The template text not only helped students with their oral communication, it was not left unnoticed that this same structure was found in the English academic paragraph: topic and conclusion sentences with detailed examples in the middle. While sounding simple, actually orally or written communicating with detailed examples is not familiar to the students. But all readily believed and understood the persuasive nature details contribute to winning debates, or in multiplying perception in their writing, for example *a blue sky or the crystal azure air that feels as though one could fly sky*.

Strategies discussed and practiced included how language implicated leadership and teamwork; how to win, not lose; and how to ask questions. Additionally, the debates were mostly *opinion-based* so Japanese students were constantly asked to express a point-of-view- not often done in the Japanese education system. All of these features prompted students to think critically as they listened and responded in their debates.

Evaluations were based on participation, debate preparation sheets and oral quizzes. For the oral quizzes students were asked to give an opening statement of their choice. Students could use notes, but could not read a statement, and for the final, no notes at all. As writing was a required component of the class, students were also asked to write a paragraph about one activity with clear structure and detailed examples which supported the systematic structure used throughout the class.

Student evaluations and comments were positive. Some typical comments from students were “this was a fun class,” “I could speak English a lot,” “I never talked about my opinion before” and “it (debates) really helped my English.” Others said, “I understand the importance of being prepared.” And finally on working with their classmates: “it was fun to talk to all classmates.”

Conclusion

A consistent simple format with interesting discussion topics allowed students to become more confident communicators. As a result, students became increasingly willing to talk and join in spirited debates. Even passive students actively participated.

Debates developed oral communication skills and confidence in my students. In addition, these simple debates promoted teamwork and critical thinking. Offering systematic communication patterns promoted creative and insightful debates as well as interesting writing. It was also readily apparent from the spirited and passionate debates that students had fun.

In preparing and developing class curricula and assessing class outcomes, I often ask myself simply, “What do I want students to walk out of this class with? Watching shy and introverted students change into confident, courageous communicators is a remarkable and rewarding transformation to witness: a worthy means to an end.

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APPENDIX 1

Name _____ Student Number _____ SCORE _____

DEBATE TOPIC _____

	Position 1~	Position 2~
Good Points	◇ ◇	◇ ◇
Bad Points	◇ ◇	◇ ◇

References:

DEBATE TOPIC _____

	Position 1~	Position 2~
Good Points	◇ ◇	◇ ◇
Bad Points	◇ ◇	◇ ◇

References:

DEBATE TOPIC _____

	Position 1~	Position 2~
Good Points	◇ ◇	◇ ◇
Bad Points	◇ ◇	◇ ◇

References:

APPENDIX 2

Judge Score Card

Teams										
Opening Statement	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Debate Points/Questions	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Debate Examples	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Closing Statement	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Totals										
Good Points/ Compliments										

Judge Score Card

Teams										
Opening Statement	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Debate Points/Questions	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Debate Examples	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Closing Statement	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Totals										
Good Points/ Compliments										

Judge Score Card

Teams										
Opening Statement	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Debate Points/Questions	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Debate Examples	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Closing Statement	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Totals										
Good Points/ Compliments										